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ABSTRACT

A program was developed at Mercy College, Detroit, to reduce attrition among conditionally admitted, full-time (CAFT) students--about one quarter of entering students at this small, urban, four-year college. The very high attrition rate among CAFT students (95%) was found to be unrelated to academic performance or program quality, and solutions to the problem were sought in the provision of student services. A Key Personnel Group, consisting of the directors of 14 non-academic college services, was created to deal with the problem. The groups' first activities were to survey student and faculty perceptions of CAFT students' non-academic needs, to assess the activities of each of the college's student services offices, and to assign responsibilities to avoid overlapping functions and address all identified needs. Then the group adopted four major approaches to student retention. First, a mandatory orientation course, taught by non-academic professionals, was developed to acquaint CAFT students with the college's services and to increase their academic survival skills. Second, an early warning system was created to identify potential dropouts. Third, the exit interview process was revised; and finally, a series of faculty development workshops were conducted to heighten faculty awareness of college services and to increase instructors' skills in dealing with CAFT students. The program's success is attested by a 50% reduction in the attrition rate of CAFT students. (HB)

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The Role of Student Services in a Retention Program: Pivot or Periphery?

Daniel R. Hoeber

A Paper Presented at the National Conference on Student Services in New Orleans, Louisiana, November 13, 1981

Top-level administrators in institutions of higher education (already a beleaguered group) are daily receiving more bad news: declining enrollments, zero population growth, cutbacks in student financial aid packages, reduction in state and federal funding, and termination of federal support for certain programs. Too many colleges now find themselves in a crisis-management situation, frantically grasping at any and every supposed solution. One of the first areas on campuses to feel the heat of such crises is the Admissions Office whose recruiters are charged with bringing in even more students each year while their Directors turn to marketing consultants for design of slicker campaigns to attract more students from an ever-declining pool of potential freshmen. What most institutions have not yet realized is

that the real problem with their declining enrollments has not so much to do with the front door as it does with the back door. An Admissions Office can be attracting as many students on a percentage basis as it has in the past, can be replacing those students whose departure is easily projected, e.g., those who are graduating, but still the enrollment figure for the year declines. Quite simply, colleges need to address negative attrition (departure prior to graduation) as carefully and vigorously as they address attracting new students. Or, to put it another way, we need as many shoulders put against the back door as we have hands holding open the front door.

We began such an effort at Mercy College of Detroit a little over six years ago before retention became a "hot item" in higher education and while our enrollment was not only holding but growing slightly each year. It might be helpful at this point to offer a thumbnail sketch of the College in that, though it is a four-year institution, it is similar in many ways to two-year colleges. Also, as will be developed later, our heaviest attrition occurred during the freshman and sophomore years. An urban college, located in the city of Detroit, Mercy presently has a head count of 2100 with an FTE of 1300. About 40% of our enrollment would be considered minority students with Blacks accounting for 35% of the total enrollment. We are primarily a commuter college with only 10% of the student body housed in one

residence hall on campus. We are an open-door college whose strength and reputation lie in professional rather than liberal arts education. Mercy College is by no means an inexpensive institution to attend (roughly $100. per credit hour), and 95% of our student body is receiving some form of direct financial assistance. Since we have no endowment to speak of, we are so heavily dependent on tuition revenues that two consecutive bad years of recruiting/retention would put the College's existence in jeapordy. Given that fact, one can see how important an organized, effective retention program is for us.

Since those of us who first became interested in mounting a retention effort were few in number (two faculty members from the Developmental Services Program and the Dean for Academic Services) and since the College had almost no computerization at that time, we selected a smaller target population than the whole campus to study. The group we selected were those students we term conditionally admitted (hereafter cited as CAFT's), i.e., those entering freshmen who come to us with below a "C" average at high school graduation. These students make up about one quarter of the freshman class each year, roughly 100 students each Fall. Besides the practical reasons for selecting this group, we recognized a certain homogeneity here, we believed the group would have historically a high attrition rate, and we felt that, if we could reverse the trend with this group, we

could do it with any group!

We began by going back five years and studying the progress of the CAFT's. Defining attrition broadly as departure prior to degree completion, we found that we had a drop-out rate in this group of 95%. Patterns were already forming to indicate that the percentage would remain the same in groups admitted less than four years prior to the study. A check of transcript requests from those who had left indicated that these students were not leaving us to transfer elsewhere. We realized that a student who had spent perhaps one semester here and performed poorly might present himself elsewhere as a first-time freshman, but, since every one of these students is receiving financial aid, his having been at Mercy College and the need, therefore, to produce a transcript would come out as a result of applying for financial aid at another college. Thus, the attrition study and the check of transcript requests indicated that the students were not only leaving us but also leaving higher education completely.

The first hypothesis offered for this horrendous attrition rate should be obvious: CAFT's are academically the weakest students at entry so they flunked out. Our semester-by-semester tracking of CAFT's' progress exploded that myth for us. Only 5%, the same percentage retained through to graduation, ever came under the sanctions of suspension or dismissal. Generally, the cumulative grade point averages of those who had left were acceptable, i.e., they were

maintaining at least the 2.00 required to graduate. In fact, the cumulative GPA's gave a bell distribution skewed to the high side. Recall, these are all students who did not achieve a 2.00 GPA in eight semesters of secondary education. This is not to say that these students had taken over the Dean's List; indeed, it is expected that the cumulative GPA's for this group would be lower than those of the clearly-admitted students, but the CAFT's were generally making acceptable academic progress at the time of departure. Even if the GPA's had been very low, we would see that as a common factor not a cause. Unfortunately, too many colleges fail to see that distinction, and some usually reliable, national research teams encourage that failure. ACT reports that academically weak students are more prone to fail to graduate; the danger is taking that factual descriptor and interpreting it as a cause for attrition.

Indeed, most colleges have been addressing the academic deficiencies of the CAFT-type of student for years. Mercy College has had a high quality Developmental Services Department for over a dozen years which offers basic skills courses in Reading, Composition, Mathematics, Chemistry, and Critical Thinking. The courses are required of students based on placement test results and feature non-punitive grading. We assumed, as most colleges do, that once a demonstrated, academic skill deficiency had been remediated, the student was totally prepared to succeed in college.

In a sense, this assumption was correct for us; the students did succeed academically, but they still were leaving in droves. Faced with the problem and puzzled about the apparent contradictions, we did what most academics would--turn to the "experts." Since retention theory was a rather new area in higher education research at the time, the paucity of material made the work go quickly but not very profitably. However, there was one source in particular that proved invaluable, not because of the action we took as a result of it but because of the reaction we had in spite of it.

In a lengthy position paper which is a prelude to an ongoing, national retention study, Paul Dressel, University Research Professor at Michigan State, writes that retention is almost solely a function of academic or programmatic quality. Further, he indicates that those who would address attrition through student services are working on the periphery of the problem. Given the known and proven quality of our academic programs, the acceptable GPA's of the population under consideration, and the fact that students were not transferring to other colleges in significant numbers, we could not disagree more with Dressel on academic quality as the key to retention. Given such negative reaction to that point and our own evidence against it, we began to consider his other contention regarding student services and question it. If academics were not the apparent problem with this group of students, then, perhaps, we should be

examining what goes on outside the classroom as it relates to these students' careers at the College.

At this time the College was preparing an AIDP grant application, and we included as one of the activities the formation of a Comprehensive Student Development Program to address formally the attrition problem among this student population. This activity was funded but received a minimal amount of the total grant, approximately $40,000. per year, out of which two full-time twelve-month salaries were paid, as well as the salaries of six student assistants for ten months each. The point here is that the Program itself cost very little to initiate and run. Those familiar with AIDP funding know that the institution must ultimately indicate how it will continue the activity after grant expiration; thus, we worked up our Program with that always in mind and developed it as a low-cost, easily-continued, and, incidentally, replicable Program. In short, you don't need external funding to replicate what will be described here.

The first step was to form what we termed a Key Personnel Group (hereafter cited as KPG) to serve actively as an advisory committee on the matter of addressing attrition through student services. The KPG consists of the directors of the following offices: Academic Counseling Center, Admissions, Business Office, Campus Ministry, Career Planning and Placement, College Preparatory Program, Developmental Services, Financial Aid, Health Services, Learning Resource

Center, Library, Personal Counseling, Residence Hall, and Student Activities. The Coordinator of Comprehensive Student Development chaired that group as well as the executive board above the KPG made up of the Dean of Students, Dean for Academic Services, President of the Faculty Senate, and two student Peer Counselors. Just getting such august bodies to meet and discuss openly with each other is no mean feat. Inevitably, there are some long-standing disagreements between certain offices and the fear of having certain territorial imperatives violated. However, when confronted with the astronomic attrition rate among CAFT's and when presented with the hypothesis that their offices, not academic departments, could turn this around, all members of the KPG launched in with enthusiasm, cooperation, and plain hard work.

The initial activity of the KPG centered on identifying clearly the purposes and functions of each of the represented offices in an attempt to determine just how effectively and efficiently we were meeting the non-academic needs of the students. Each service office submitted its stated purposes in writing and then submitted a lengthy and detailed listing of the functions that office performs. Those functions were collated under general headings, e.g., "academic advising," "personal counseling," etc. From this collation we put together a thirty-page Student Service Inventory and gave each office a copy of the Inventory to complete and turn back. This Inventory was designed as follows: each function

submitted by the offices was listed down the center of the pages; to the left of each function, there was a space for each office to indicate that it now was performing that function as a major or minor consumer of its total workload time; to the right of the stated function was a space to indicate whether the office felt it should be performing that function as a major or minor responsibility. Once all Inventories had been returned, the Coordinator of Student Development arranged to spend at least three full working days in each service office observing the work flow, workload, and routine functioning of the office in terms of the office's responses on the Inventory. This observation also allowed for an objective evaluation of the interpersonal communication between the student service personnel and their clientele--the students themselves. After completing the observation, the Coordinator met with the head of that office who had completed the Inventory to clarify/correct any of the functions initially listed by that office. Generally speaking, we found that most offices had "short-changed" themselves, i.e., they had overlooked some of their routine functions.

Once all observations were completed, the Coordinator produced a Student Service Inventory Summary showing again all functions but listing under each service office which ones were performing that function and to what degree. What we found as the KPG began to study the Summary was duplication,

fragmentation, and actual absence of some services. Faced with graphic evidence of the problems and making the logical assumption that, if five different offices were offering the same service, students wouldn't know exactly where to go to get what, the KPG began the process of going through the Inventory Summary function by function to determine exactly which office should be providing which services, given the stated purposes and professional capabilities. Through inter-office agreements at the KPG meetings we were able to place the functions where they best belonged in order to serve students more effectively and efficiently.

Having completed that task, we next turned to an assessment of the non-academic needs of the CAFT's. Now that it was clear what services could be provided and who should provide them, we developed a needs assessment instrument of the "card sort" variety. Each of the needs statement cards was keyed to one of the service offices. The instrument was then administered to all CAFT's on campus at that time regardless of their class level at the time. Simultaneously, the instrument was administered to all faculty and staff on campus at a workshop on student development; here, they were asked to respond in terms of what they as faculty and staff believed to be the needs of such students.

As might be expected, the two populations did not necessarily agree on the priority of needs. The students, freshmen through seniors, consistently placed career or

job-related needs in their top ten; faculty and staff regularly placed basic academic skills at the head of their lists as what they perceived these students needed most. The disparity is more apparent than real. That is, students see college as a four-year wait before they can get what they really want--a job; also, they see little connection between what they are doing here and what job they hope to have. The faculty, those who like "school" so much they never left, see the four years as being more important than what will happen to the students at the end of that time.

At any rate, when presented with the student results of the needs assessment, the KPG members reacted initially as might be expected: they claimed that they did provide services to meet those needs but that CAFT's rarely made use of the services or waited until a crisis by which time it was too late. It was clear that many of the service offices had become models of passivity. It was just as clear that, if we were to meet these needs and thus hope to stem the tide of attrition, we had to get the two groups together. We had to find a way of informing the CAFT's early on in their college careers where to go when to see whom about what. We had to improve the visibility, accessibility, and image of our student service offices. And, we had to find a way to heighten faculty and staff awareness of the signs of non-academic needs which students put up, as well as what to do once one recognizes these signs.

In addressing the problem of better informing the students regarding services available to them to meet their needs, the KPG actually hit upon a plan to deal not only with that issue but also with their own lack of visibility and positive image. These student service personnel designed an Orientation/ Self-Management course to be limited to and required of all CAFT's. The course was to be taught by student service professionals exclusively and offered each Fall semester just for the CAFT's. This two-hour course was to be fully credited and serve as an elective credit for these students. The course was so professionally designed and cogently presented as to gain immediate approval from the faculty Curriculum Committee.

Although this course is the subject of another complete presentation to be made later, some brief remarks about it are in order here. The course provides a connection between the students and the student service professionals in that the latter are the instructors; thus, the students do learn what services are available, where they should go, and whom to see on campus when a particular need arises. However, we go far beyond just exposure. Each student service professional is actually teaching units in his area of expertise, e.g., the head of Personal Counseling teaches units on ways to recognize, use, and defuse academically-related stress; the Comptroller teaches units on personal money management; the Placement Director teaches segments on interest inventorying,

resume constructing from freshman year on, and job search and research; the Librarian teaches basic research methods; the Learning Resources Director teaches students the tricks of the trade in test taking and note taking. These are just a few samples but should suffice to show how we managed to provide one solution to two problems: students receive instruction in areas related to their stated needs, and student service professionals get the exposure they needed as well as the opportunity to improve the personal image of their offices.

Some spin-off benefits are just as noteworthy. Student service personnel are very much enjoying their role as teaching faculty and get an opportunity to make use of their degree training in a way heretofore unavailable to them. It also gives them some understanding of the "quirks" of full-time faculty who teach the CAFT's in other content courses regularly. Faculty report that "veterans" of this course are infinitely better prepared to be college students than are many of the clearly-admitted, supposedly brighter students. In fact, many faculty are now lobbying us to open the course to all freshmen.

Obviously, this course alone was not sufficient to remove the attrition problem. The KPG set in motion an Early Warning System and improved the exit interview process. We determined that two of the surest signs of a student's comtemplating withdrawal are neglecting to reapply for

financial aid and failure to keep a preregistration appointment. The Financial Aid Office now reports immediately to the Coordinator of Student Development any CAFT who fails to reapply as directed; the Academic Counseling Center does the same for any student not making or not keeping an appointment to preregister. The Coordinator then contacts the students by phone immediately to inquire as to the difficulty, offer assistance, and reschedule, if appropriate, the necessary appointments. In addition, at midterm each semester the Coordinator forwards a simple Progress Report form to all faculty who have any CAFT's in their classes; the form is essentially a "regrets only" sheet, i.e., the faculty need return the form only on those students who do not have a "C" average at midterm. These forms are filed in the student's counseling folder so that, since preregistration follows on the heels of midterm, those in the Academic Counseling Center can discuss these reports with the student in the preregistration process and suggest methods for dealing with the academic problems.

For students actually withdrawing from the College, we have established a better exit interview process than the old one which was little more than a check-out sheet designed to make sure the student did not owe money to the College. Now, those students withdrawing must have a formal exit interview with a professional in the Academic Counseling Center who completes an anecdotal report and forwards a copy

to the Student Development Coordinator. Twice each semester the Coordinator corresponds personally with each student who has formally withdrawn asking after his plans and offering assistance in any way possible. Quite often, it has been possible to get the student back in college at least on a part-time basis rather than losing him altogether. It should be noted that such correspondence goes on also with students who have been academically suspended; our research shows that these students tend to take this temporary exclusion as permanent and never return.

Through all of these activities one group, the faculty, has largely been absent. We realized that nothing less than a campus-wide concerted effort would make the difference ultimately in retaining these students; thus, the student service offices set out to involve the faculty in this effort. The intitial contact came in a Faculty Development Workshop held during the period between the start of faculty contracts and the beginning of a Fall term, a time set aside for planning, meetings, etc. The written support of the College President for this Workshop, her announced intention of attending herself, and our scheduling it immediately following the President's State of the College Address were enough to insure excellent attendance. It was at this first Workshop where we presented the awful attrition figures, got the faculty to complete the needs assessment survey, and informed them of our plan to address the needs and the attrition problem.

What we proposed to do for the faculty, in a subtle way, was to send them to school to learn their school. In other words, we presented a schedule of faculty development seminars to be held every two weeks in the two-hour "dead-time" block on Mondays during which committee meetings usually take place. Each session would be run by the head of one of the service offices and would teach faculty exactly what the capabilities of those offices are in meeting student needs. In a sense, it is an Orientation Course in disguise; faculty and staff would be learning from a slightly different perspective what the CAFT's would be learning in their course. More than anything else, faculty are taugnt diagnostic skills; they are taught to recognize academic signs of non-academic needs and then what to do about the diagnosis--how and where to make a referral. For example, a faculty member complains about a student who always arrives five minutes late for an 8:30 AM class and then proceeds to nod off in ten minutes. The faculty member either berates the student or ignores him assuming that the student is demonstrating his boredom and lack of interest. What the instructor does not bother to find out is that the student is working a midnight shift, maneuvering through rush-hour traffic, and arrives without even a cup of coffee for what the instructor assumes is going to be an intellectual exercise. It is certainly possible that the student is bored, but more likely than not his sleeping is an outward sign of a non-academic need which,

if left unmet, is probably going to cause major problems. If the faculty member investigated with the student the cause of his unacceptable classroom behavior, he might be able to propose a solution, e.g., enrolling for a later section of the same course, and make an appropriate referral.

These workshops have opened up a new world to most faculty, the world of student services. Many faculty did not even know who held what service office positions much less the academic backgrounds, abilities, purposes and functions of the professionals in these offices. It was quite a revelation to many of them that the Comptroller was something other than the institutionalization of Simon Legree. Not only have we produced a better informed faculty, but also we have created a sense of community at the College or at least a coming together over one major College problem. Even if we were not making strides against attrition, the entire Student Development Program would have produced some remarkable changes on campus.

However, the actual reduction of attrition among the CAFT's since the inception of these activities is truly remarkable. In a study of CAFT's admitted prior to our Program, we noted that the same single period, between the freshman and sophomore year, was always the time of highest attrition. In fact, 47% of a class of CAFT's admitted in one Fall semester would drop out over the period between the first two years and never return for their second Fall

semester. This figure is not gross, i.e., it does not include those who left during the freshman year--just the percentage of a total entering class who left during this one period. In the years since the student-service based retention effort was started, the attrition rate during that same period has been holding at 15%. Overall, attrition among CAFT's has been reduced by 50% since the implementation of the Student Development Program so that we are now beginning to graduate considerably more than the 5% of any entering class of these students as had been the case in the past.

The spin-off benefits of such success, although perhaps not as graphic, are nonetheless important. That office which usually takes the blame of low student enrollment, Admissions, has a much easier time of recruiting now that it can boast of the high success rate at the College for these types of students. Also, recruiters no longer have to put up with the negative publicity associated with a school that used to put 95% of CAFT's out on the street undegreed. Student service personnel are enjoying a visibility and reputation with faculty that heretofore was non-existent. All students, regardless of their admission status initially, are now enjoying the benefits of more effective, efficient, and outgoing student services and a better informed faculty. Finally, the College has recently formed a Task Force on Retention charged with addressing that issue campus wide.

All of this began with the belief that retention for our

College was not a function solely of academic quality. Certainly, no one claims that quality in the classroom is unimportant, but we learned quickly that the presence or absence of a certain quality was all but unrelated to our attrition problem. What we learned was very different from Professor Dressel's contention: for us, the relation of student service to a reduction in attrition is not peripheral but pivotal.

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